

LOCAL

Fridley storm shelter doubles as learning hub and literacy center

Nonprofit helped bring learning hub, programming to Fridley community.

By **Tim Harlow** (<https://www.startribune.com/tim-harlow/6370615/>) Star Tribune |

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Natividad Seefeld could not believe it when she answered the phone and the caller told her he wanted to start a library at the Park Plaza Cooperative, a small manufactured home park just off Hwy. 65 in Fridley.

"I thought it was a fake phone call," she said. "Anybody calling from Washington and I wonder what did I do wrong."

The call came from Libraries Without Borders, a nonprofit with the mission of bringing knowledge and information to people in need. And with it came the offer to turn the diverse community's storm shelter into a learning hub by supplying Wi-Fi connections, books, art materials, computers and iPads.

"It could be everybody's dream to walk to a building and use a library," said Seefeld, who has lived at Park Plaza since 1998 and served as its president for the past 10 years. "Reading brings people together."

Many of the 83 families who live at Park Plaza are immigrants whose primary language is not English. About 30% have trouble accessing a library due to a lack of transportation, or can't get to a library when it's open, according to Anoka County Library and Libraries Without Borders officials.

But residents did turn out Saturday for a celebration kicking off an ambitious series of live programs that will include everything from English language classes to reading, writing and computer skills.

"We are super excited to partner with Libraries Without Borders," Seefeld said.

In 2018, Park Plaza opened a new aboveground storm shelter strong enough to withstand an F5 tornado. The building has a kitchen, gyms and rooms with tables and chairs — a perfect space for a learning and literacy hub.

"I think it's great," said Fridley Mayor Scott Lund. Using the building as a library and connecting people to it can only be positive, he said. "It's great thinking on their part."

Libraries Without Borders had already brought its "Wash and Learn Initiative" to Minnesota, partnering with libraries to bring story times to laundromats. As the nonprofit in 2018 launched its Manufactured Housing Initiative to reach the estimated 22 million people in the United States who live in manufactured homes, it called Seefeld.

The organization held a town hall meeting in 2019, and programs were just getting started when the coronavirus pandemic took hold in 2020. Some programs, like a Cinco de Mayo event, were canceled. Others were shifted online, but many Park Plaza residents didn't have access to the internet or reliable devices.

Now, with the building back open, it's full-steam ahead, Seefeld said.

Enter the Anoka County Library, which will let residents check out laptops to take home. Librarians will do live, on-site story times twice a month. There will be programs featuring local artists, musicians and historians, just like those in a traditional library. Digital workshops are on the schedule, too.



Diaz painted a mural at the learning center, just off Hwy. 65 in Fridley.

"People see libraries as a bastion of dusty books on a shelf, but the library's mission is to connect people with ideas and information," said Erin Straszewski, Anoka County Library community engagement manager. "This is a perfect example of how the library works to offer the community what it needs. To see people connect on their turf and terms, that is exciting."

Straszewski said she hopes bringing the library to Park Plaza will build a bridge allowing residents to access a larger array of library services, and even visit brick-and-mortar branches. After Saturday's event, 10 families signed up for library cards, Seefeld said.

Park Plaza could serve as a model for other manufactured home parks, said Libraries Without Borders Executive Director Adam Echelman. The nonprofit is looking to bring library services to a few such communities in southern Minnesota, he said.

Seefeld said residents are already asking about new English language courses scheduled to start in mid-July and about resources for finding jobs.

And, Seefeld adds, there is one more benefit to Park Plaza's library: "You can talk loud if you want to."

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